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ABSTRACT

This document identifies the methods used in college level, reading oriented, developmental English courses to build the reading-thinking skills needed for broad comprehension of knowledge. Because the cultural and intellectual environment of the educationally disadvantaged college student may be very different from the cultural and intellectual orientation of the reading material assigned in his courses, he needs skills that enable him to understand and synthesize unfamiliar ideas in a logical fashion. Since many disadvantaged youth lack these skills, developmental English courses include reading survey methods that dovetail with writing organization methods and the forms of logical support. Thus, the reading-thinking process becomes a reading-thinking-writing process that enables the student to succeed in discussion, composition, and essay examinations. Because the acquisition of reading synthesis skills increases the disadvantaged student's survival power, developmental English teachers must increasingly deal with reading as a thinking process. (Author/RB)

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Reading as a Thinking Process: Implications for the Educationally Disadvantaged College Student

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In a sense, the realm of the college English teacher represents three levels of communication. The first includes all the information students gain from other human beings, television, movies and the ever present cassette tapes; the second encompasses the ideas they read in books, newspapers and periodicals; the third contains the things they write about, what they hear, see and read. Often teachers assume that because students write reasonably well about their own experiences and convictions or about movies and television programs they will automatically write well about material they read. Too often this is an erroneous assumption, for a number of today's college students cannot successfully use what they read to make reasonably sophisticated judgments -- not merely because they cannot comprehend what they read, but also because they do no react actively enough to written material to make reading a part of the thinking process. College teachers often worry about students' inability to deal adequately with complex reading selections when asked to write about them. Sometimes they assume that students merely cannot organize thoughts well enough to get them on paper, a relatively common condition. But given the opportunity to write about personal experiences, many of the same students produce writing substantially better than when they are asked to read something, identify the author's ideas, make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of those inferences. In essence, these students cannot come to grips with the written word. They write well only about the things they, themselves, have seen, heard or experienced or about the things they believe.

The New Marginal Student

Why are a growing number of college students unable to wrestle with written words and win? Perhaps one reason is that, as colleges and universities adopt open-door policies, more college students have poor records of academic achievement. Although these students constitute a very heterogeneous group representing a variety of levels within society, many have several things in common: they possess poorly developed reading and composition skills, and they share a number of academic characteristics.

1. Most of these students do not read for pleasure, and some have never read an unassigned novel or short story.

2. Few would consider curling up with a good book much fun although some might watch the dramatization of a literary classic on television.

3. Many consistently watch a great deal of television, and most respond rather well to visual stimuli.

4. Most have limited written vocabularies although their spoken vocabularies may be better.

5. Many have not made friends with the dictionary, avoiding its use if they have only a remote idea what a word means.

6. Most have extremely poor study skills, and many are poor test takers.

7. Some lack adequate understanding of sentence structure and cannot identify complete thoughts in either reading or writing.

8. Some are not aware of drastic reading deficiencies until they enter college while others live with comprehension problems for years, sometimes hiding them successfully if not required to write about what they read.

9. Many struggle for survival in all courses, not just English.

10. Most verbalize that they do not want to read some assignments because they are "not interested in them." These assignments are usually foreign to their own experience.

11. Most learn well in individualized laboratory programs where they can proceed at their own speed and compete with themselves.

12. Many are good classroom participants when drawing upon experience and general knowledge, but few can go beyond the obvious in discussing what they read, perhaps because many are at least two years behind other students in reading development.

Lessons Learned From Other Teachers

Given these characteristics, the college English teacher must endeavor to stimulate marginal readers while retaining the interest of better students. True, teachers have always faced this dilemma; but few college professors are trained to cope with large numbers of underachievers in the classroom. When confronted with them, college teachers sometimes cast about for know-how, seeking advice wherever they can find it.

In attempting to help students read more and respond more intelligently to what they read, however, college teachers should avoid making some of the mistakes often made by others. For instance, they should avoid asking the wrong question: "Why are these students in college?" They should ask instead: "Since these students are in college, how can we facilitate their learning?" In addition, college professors should not abdicate their own responsibility in the reading process. Because most teachers in higher education are subject matter specialists trained in very traditional methods of teaching, they tend to lecture and test and assume that all their students

can read the sources assigned. Professors also have faith that most students make the same inferences they do. In reality some students may not even approximate the professor's vision. If the college teacher realizes this void, he often refers the student to the reading teacher in the learning center and frees his mind from worry, promptly assuming that someone else is solving his problem. Finally, college professors should not choose textbooks merely bacause they represent competent scholarship or attractive treatment. As important as these qualities are, they are useless if the readability level is beyond the reach of a number of students.

Positive Directions

If English teachers in higher education are increasingly confronted by the problems of educationally disadvantaged youth with marginal concept synthesis skills, new directions are needed for both the classroom teacher and the reading teacher to follow. Above all else, the classroom must become the center of reading excitement; of careful selection of a great variety of materials that the professor really cares about and all students can read; of three way interaction between professor, students and course material that produces thinking and reacting as the natural results of reading. To achieve this meaningful reading environment the professor may need to change his teaching methods to produce an informal rather than formal atmosphere. He may need to teach a reading survey method and the forms of logical support that help students make inferences and come to valid conclusions. He may need to be as concerned about the readability of his texts as he is about their authenticity. He may need to expose students to a great variety of books and familiarize them with the library. Finally, he may need to examine his own enthusiasm for reading and the reading example he sets for his students.

Although reading and the resulting generation of ideas should star in the classroom, the college English teacher has several supporting actors to aid in the process. His major ally can be the reading teacher in the reading laboratory, in spite of the misuse some professors make of this facility. As a team, the reading teacher and the classroom teacher may function in a number of ways: to choose texts that are suitable in reading level, to produce reading programs using classroom materials, to dovetail reading and writing exercises, to create and administer vocabulary exercises using words from current texts, to pre- and post-test students in several reading categories. Indeed, whole portions of classes can be taught by placing class and classroom teacher within the reading lab and training reading teacher, English teacher, reading graduate assistants and tutors to function as instructional teams, a method already used in University College at Michigan State University.

Because marginal English and reading students often function best in reacting to what they read, assessing ideas and coming to valid conclusions if they have someone with whom they can read and rap, another useful ally of the college teacher is the peer reading and writing tutor. Carefully chosen and well trained, these tutors can sometimes provide the stimulus and guidance necessary for the synthesis of ideas much better than English professors or reading teachers. Tutors can read and react <u>with</u> other students, can question, rehash, put ideas together, sort and discard, and make some personal sense from what is read.

Making reading a meaningful, exciting, challenging, thinking process is possible if college educators discard the notion that reading is something students complete in grade school and that it remains static thereafter.

It is possible if college English teachers are willing to revitalize their classrooms and to extend their teaching aims as far into laboratory, rap sessions, and daily living as is necessary for active student participation in the reading-thinking process. It is possible to the degree that the instructional team process works. The need is great enough to make it worth the effort.

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